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The Way of the Lord in the Discovery of America.

A SERMON

PREACHED BEFORE THE EASTERN SYNOD OF THE REFORMED CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES, AND THE PROFESSORS AND STUDENTS OF FRANKLIN AND MARSHALL COLLEGE AND THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY,

IN THE

FIRST REFORMED CHURCH,

LANCASTER, PENNSYLVANIA,

—ON—

"COLUMBUS DAY," OCTOBER 21, 1892,

BY THE

REV. JOSEPH HENRY DUBBS, D. D.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

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SERMON.

PSALM lxxvii: 19.—"Thy way is in the sea and thy path is in the great waters."

In the text the Psalmist, in strains of exalted poetry, praises the inscrutable power of God. The direct allusion is, of course, to the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, when it could be literally said that the way of Jehovah, as the deliverer and conductor of His people, was in the sea and his path was in the deep waters. But the eye of the sacred poet takes in a wider range, and he recognizes the fact that the deliverances of the Almighty are constant and His power supreme. To him the wonders of nature, no less than the revealings of history are one glorious theophany. From the mountains of Palestine, we may suppose, he beholds the sailing of the treasure-ships to Ophir and Tarshish—he sees the white sails of Phœnician fleets on their way to lands mysterious and unknown —and to his enlightened vision all this is no less miraculous than the grand revelations of the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt. As he says elsewhere: "They that go down to the sea in ships, these see the works of the Lord and his wonders in the deep." It is God who holds the tiller; it is God who reefs the sails. The sailor to distant lands is as certainly guided by Divine power as was Moses when, with Israel's hosts, he passed through the depths of the sea.

To some minds all this may appear to have been mere superstition, intensified by fear of the unfamiliar, but it is otherwise with the soul that is not only poetic but religious. The sacred poet did not comprehend all that his utterances involved. He could have no idea that what he saw was but the beginning of the wonders of the Lord; yet who can doubt that if with prophetic vision he had beheld the future history of maritime invention and discovery—culminating in the wonderful event which the world celebrates to-day—he would even more distinctly have seen the way

of the Lord in the sea—His wonderful path in the great waters. Of all this, it may be said, the text contains but slight indications; but the germinal truth is there, from which all the rest is developed. "Let it teach us," says an eminent commentator, "that through all the changes of the world's history Jehovah is still the same; and that when His people pass through the deep waters he guides them safely to the farther side."

History is the development of the divine purpose All its revealings to the eye of faith are but illustrations of this fundamental truth. On an occasion like the present it might be vain to attempt a minute recital of events with which all may be presumed to be familiar; but to look upward with believing eye—to behold the hand of the Lord in the greatest event of modern times—to consider, in brief, *The way of the Lord in the Discovery of America*—this is a privilage which as Christians we cannot too highly esteem.

I.

IN EVERY GREAT HISTORICAL MOVEMENT IT IS GOD WHO PREPARES THE WAY.

He never allows a great work to be begun and ended by a single man. He often chooses the humblest instruments to be the advance-couriers of His glory.

In the discovery of this western continent these truths are abundantly illustrated. For ages there had been vague notions of the existence of western lands; there were traditions of fleets that had sailed to unknown regions. We do not contest the claims that have been made in behalf of the Northmen, the Zeno brothers, and other voyagers, when we assert that theirs were *discoveries which did not discover*. Their results were known but to a little company that failed to appreciate their value, and soon they were almost forgotten. Surely, it is not through such narrow channels that the stream of history can be made to flow.

Instead of believing that the way of the Lord in the discovery of America was prepared by a few obscure voyagers, we would rather believe that there were thousands and tens of thousands who were called to this glorious work. Of what use could the discovery have been in the darkest ages, when Europe was overrun by barbarous tribes, whose only purpose was to destroy? But now the long winter of mediæval darkness was passing away, and

the veins of the nations were throbbing with a new life. The nationalities of Europe had already been formed, and were becoming more and more commensurate with the regions in which certain languages were spoken. Italy had already produced its most celebrated poets; and the three great inventions, printing, gunpowder and the mariner's compass, had changed the character of war and peace. Most wonderful of all was the deathless thirst for knowledge that induced men of the most diverse nationalities to sacrifice every comfort, and even life itself, for the recovery of some fragment of ancient art, or the discovery of something that men had not known before. It was a wonderful age, and in its wonders expectant thousands beheld the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. It is in these intelligent multitudes of the *renaissance*, that we recognize the true precursors of the great discovery.

It has been usual to regard the Church of the Fifteenth Century as utterly sunken and degraded. Would it not be better to consider that century a period of preparation for her great awakening? In many countries men were calling for a reformation *in capite et membris*. In Spain itself the Christian consciousness was clearer than it had been for ages. Mohammedanism had been driven out, and for the first time in eight centuries the destinies of the world appeared to be in the hands of servants of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Is there any reason why we should utterly repudiate the period from which many of our greatest privileges are historically derived? If it was a dark age, we cannot deny that light was struggling with the darkness. Let us open our eyes and be thankful for the light. We refuse to renounce our patrimony in English literature; we boast that Chaucer and Shakespeare are ours, though they sleep in a foreign land; can we fail to see how the hand of the Lord was mighty in preparing a path for our feet? If the church of more modern times has taken up, as we believe, the best life of the period which preceded it, may we not with sympathetic throbbings feel the power of that life, as it beat in the hearts of the men who lived four hundred years ago? Is it not well to appreciate the continuity of Christ's promise, and when history recalls the learning, the piety, the self-sacrifice of the past, to exclaim with rapturous devotion: "This too, thank God, is mine!"

Thus from many sources flowed the streams that together

formed a current whose force was irresistible. Great discoveries followed each other in rapid succession and the greatest of them all could no longer be delayed. Every great event in the history of the world resembles the central mystery of the incarnation in that it can appear only when the fullness of time has come. The legends of the past had all been told; Vinland was forgotten; the tales of the voyages of Buddhist priests had never been related in Europe; but in a vastly more general way the human race demanded a broader field for its development. The time had come, and with it came the man.

II.

IN EVERY GENUINE HISTORIC ADVANCE IT IS GOD WHO SELECTS THE LEADER.

Often it seems as if He chose the mean things of this world on purpose to confound the wise. It has been so in all ages of the world's history. The founder of the grandest Assyrian dynasty was a vine-dresser; one of the most brilliant of the mediæval popes had been a keeper of swine. When the man is needed it matters not how humble have been his beginnings; he will rise when he is called; he will triumph over unnumbered difficulties, and accomplish the mission to which he has been anointed. Of this general truth the career of the discoverer of America is a perfect illustration. In anticipation of the present anniversary ancient records have been searched as was never done before, and facts have been established which had previously been called in question; but the obscurity which attends the early years of Columbus has not been entirely removed. For our present purpose, however, it matters little whether he was born in Genoa or in the neighboring city of Savona; it is certain that he did not belong to the classes from which in those days great things were expected. His father was a weaver and wool-comber, and the son learned his trade. The family frequently changed its residence, and left no deep impression in the places where it dwelt. It is known that Columbus made voyages in his early youth, and thus acquired the experience which was afterwards so precious; but this was not remarkable in a city where every one was interested in navigation, and where he who was a tradesman to-day might become the captain of a ship to-morrow.

With reference to the early education of Columbus the obscurity

is even greater, but it is certain that he was not in later days a rude, ignorant seaman. It may or may not be true that he had studied for some time at the University of Pavia; but he knew Latin well enough to write it; and Humboldt assures us that he was profoundly versed in theology and patristic literature, and knew all of science that the age could teach him. The same distinguished scholar enumerates thirty ancient and mediæval authors from whose writings Columbus quoted with intelligence and accuracy. Will it be denied that in later years he held his own in lengthy discussions with the professors of the University of Salamanca? Has it ever been doubted that he had sufficient culture to win golden opinions at the court of Ferdinand and Isabella—that in the royal presence he conducted himself, as if he had been born on the steps of a throne? How Columbus became learned is a mystery that will never be revealed; but it is the mystery of genius. It is the mystery which confronts mankind whenever God calls the humble to the high places of the earth. "It is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes."

To delineate the character of a great man is one of the most difficult tasks that can possibly be attempted. The picture, even when drawn by the ablest hand, will represent no more than the standpoint of the observer. The leader of a grand historic movement is in a certain sense its representative and exponent; he does not stand for himself alone; he is the incarnation of the spirit of thousands. Modern art has produced a composite picture, in which the features of many persons are cast upon a single photographic plate, until at last there appears a countenance, strange but familiar, that combines the peculiarities of them all. In a somewhat similar way the great man is many-sided. He has some of the weaknesses of his age, or he would not be in sympathy with it; but he also embodies its noblest aspirations, its grandest ideals, and in his efforts to actualize them he is sustained by a strength that is as the strength of thousands.

In our estimate of Christopher Columbus we are not inclined to accept without question the eulogies of Irving and Prescott, and least of all the ecstatic rhapsodies of the French school, under the lead of Roselly de Lorgues, which ascribe to Columbus all the virtues of a saint. On the other hand we are not ready to follow the lead of the modern iconoclasts, who judge the past exclusively by the standards of the present, and have hardly left us an ideal in secular history that can be confidently held up for the imita-

tion of youth. We cannot go wrong when we, at least, acknowledge, with Humboldt, that the discoverer of America was a grand, impressive personage.

"Columbus," says Irving, "had the faults of his age, especially those of the Romanic nations. He was irritable and impetuous; and seems to have believed that none but Christ's people had rights which were worthy of consideration." We might add that at times he manifested the pride of a Spaniard and the passionate nature of an Italian; that at sea, like many an other naval commander, he regarded his commission as his highest law, so that in seeking to obey the unreasonable demands of an avaricious king he was guilty of tyranny and oppression. It could hardly have been otherwise with the servants of the monarch who had just expelled the Moors from their beautiful home in Grenada. We have no desire to apologize for the treatment of the Caribs, which began with an attempt at conversion and ended with their enslavement. It was shameful conduct—whenever and wherever practiced—but before we join in the merciless condemnation which has been visited on Columbus by certain recent historians, it may be well to remember that centuries had to pass before Christian nations learned their duty to the oppressed; and that in so far as the treatment of the Indians is concerned, our nation has also had its "century of dishonor."

Columbus was certainly no saint—whatever Rome may say—but we are ready to confess, with a Spanish writer, that "he had a soul which was superior to the age in which he lived." Burdened with mediæval superstition, often misled by false science, he was yet the embodiment of the ripened aspirations of his time. With all his imperfections there are in his personality certain characteristics which are absolutely splendid; which shine with undimmed glory as he stands unrivalled on the pinnacle of the ages.

Among these characteristics we are inclined to give the foremost place to his unwavering consciousness that he had been called to the accomplishment of a mighty work. Not Abraham, when he went forth from his kindred and his father's house to seek an unknown country in the west, was more thoroughly assured of his mission than was Columbus when he believed himself called to follow the path which the Lord had shown him in the deep waters. When and how the call came to him no one can tell; but there can be no doubt that at all times he conceived

himself an agent of the Deity, bound at the peril of his soul to accomplish his appointed work. Though in accordance with the crude geographical notions of his time, he naturally supposed that his first purpose must be to find a western route to India, he never doubted that he would discover many islands by the way ; and that, as his name—Christopher—indicated, he should "bear Christ" to regions yet unknown. It was this unfailing consciousness that caused him to study the geographical questions of the age as none had done before ; that sent him on distant voyages, even beyond *ultima Thule*, possibly to gather information concerning earlier navigators ; that sustained him wandering from one court to another, seeking aid to carry out a plan which the learned declared to be vain and chimerical. Was the call a mere hallucination, as some have ventured to assert? It may be quite in accordance with the spirit of the present age to speak of self-deception—perhaps of incipient insanity ; but if the call of Columbus was "mere monomania" it were to be wished that such delusions might become more general. It would be a grand thing if, by any means, such a call could be made to resound in the ears of the sleepers of the age, a call that would induce them to go forth, if not to the discovery of new worlds, at least to the realization of the hope of Columbus—to the glorious work of bearing the Gospel to the most distant lands. Shall those of us who are ministers of the Gospel, who in the solemn hour of our ordination professed on bended knee that we were "fully persuaded in our hearts that we had been *called of God* to the Holy Ministry," shall we deny the reality of the call which led an obscure voyager to the accomplishment of the greatest work in the history of the ages?

O, for the faith—the grand, the glorious faith—of the great discoverer! It was a faith like that of Noah, by which he "condemned the world." Without this precious gift he might have despaired a hundred times ; he would have turned to commerce and escaped the misery of begging for bread at the gates of La Rabida ; but he had the faith that can remove mountains, and thus he became, as truly as the grand examples of ancient times, "an heir of the righteousness which is by faith."

That the life of Columbus was profoundly religious, according to the standards of his time, will hardly be denied. One of his recent biographers, it is true, professes to be "disgusted with his cant," but the man who could use such language would be

equally offended by the songs of Zion—by the sacrifices of devotion which are offered up to-day in thousands of churches. Washington Irving sums up the whole matter when he says, on excellent authority: "His religion was fervent and devout; religion mingled with the whole of his thoughts, and shone forth in his most private and unstudied writings. Whenever he made a discovery he devoutly gave thanks to God. The voice of prayer and the melody of praise rose from his ships on discovering the new world, and his first act on landing was to prostrate himself upon the earth and offer up thanksgivings. All his great enterprises were undertaken in the name of the Holy Trinity and he partook of the holy sacrament prior to his embarkation. The religion thus deeply seated in his soul diffused a sober dignity and a benign composure over his whole deportment; his language was pure and guarded, and free from all gross and irreverent surprises."

The imagination of Columbus was unusually active; but this was not an unmingled blessing. While it assured him of the realization of his grandest ideals, it sometimes brought him visions that were unreal and deceptive, and the thoughts that rose unbidden in his soul amid the afflictions of Hispaniola and Veragua appeared as audible voices. The conflict was intense, and poor, weak human nature was at times unable to withstand the strain; but though we appreciate all this as we look back through the ages, we cannot fail to recognize the mighty arm and the loving heart.

III.

IT BECOMES EVIDENT AS WE TRACE THIS REMARKABLE HISTORY THAT GOD WONDERFULLY PROTECTED THE MAN WHOM HE HAD CHOSEN.

On the extraordinary voyage which has been so often described Columbus kept a daily record, which within the past year has been minutely examined. It is now possible to follow his course with sufficient accuracy; and the Royal Geographical Society declares that, in consequence chiefly of the researches of Lieutenant Murdoch, of the U. S. Navy, we can point out the spot on Watling's Island, where his keel first struck the sand. But what appears most wonderful in this strange recital is the enumeration of the Divine Providences which accompanied the voyager on his untried way. The breezes blew gently to the west, and every ocean

current helped him onward. The mutinous sailors, who expected to enter a sea of darkness, were every morning surprised to behold an unclouded sky. If some of them imagined that by following the curve of the earth they would finally reach a region whence they could never return—where their heads would hang downward and they might possibly fall into the vast abyss of space—smooth seas and unclouded skies constantly invited them to sail a little further. Every day during the latter part of the voyage had its sign to beckon them onward; and it seemed as if Providence had directed nature to woo the voyagers to the promised land—for, indeed, the time had come.

When we join in spirit in the hymns sung by Columbus and his little company as they stood for the first time on the shore of Guanahani, we feel that our task, so far as the present festival is concerned, is almost completed. We need not follow the great discoverer to Cuba and Hispaniola, and back to Spain, to behold the meretricious greeting which an ungrateful king accorded him. Still less need we speak of the succeeding voyages, which to their commander were but occasions for disappointment and despondency. What cared the Spanish court for the discovery of lands inhabited by naked savages? It was gold that they sought, and unless he brought it, and brought it abundantly, his work was regarded as a failure. Is there anything in this eventful history more lamentable than the ingratitude which pursued the great commander? That after the discovery had been made, as he himself said, "every tailor in Spain pretended that he could have done it just as well;" that the continent which he discovered was named after a man whom history does not praise and who would otherwise be forgotten; that as the crowning act of infancy, Columbus was removed from the colony which he had founded, and taken home in chains. Can there be anything which is more sorrowful than this? Yes! there is a view which is even more depressing. It is to see the greatest man of his age degrading himself to be the instrument of an avaricious king in his unhallowed search for gold; to see him spending his later years, until he died in obscurity, in a fruitless struggle to obtain the territorial possessions which that king had promised him. What does it matter that he vowed to devote the wealth he hoped to gain to a new crusade for the recovery of the Holy Land? Would it not have been better if he could have risen superior to his age, anticipating the grand revelations of the future?—if he had welcomed the higher light that was even then

beginning to break upon the world, standing forth as a hero for humanity, and truth, and righteousness? In that dark and gloomy age it might have been his fate to perish at the stake; but he would have become, if not a saint, at least a blessed martyr.

Columbus died in ignorance of the extent of his discovery. In all secular history there was no event which for profound significance could be compared with it; but, as he himself said, he had but opened the gates "for others more fortunate than himself. He supposed to the last that he had touched the coasts of India, imagining that possibly Hispaniola was Ophir, from which Solomon brought his gold. "What visions of glory," says one of his biographers, "would have burst upon his mind if he had known that he had discovered a new continent, equal to the old in magnitude, and separated by two vast oceans from all the land hitherto occupied by civilized men!" But are there not grander things which his prophetic eye might have discovered? Is it not true that we now enjoy, as the results of that momentous epoch, blessings of which the great discoverer in the wildest flights of his fancy had never dreamed?

IIII.

WE SEE HOW THE PATH OF THE LORD IN THE GREAT WATERS LED TO THE GRANDEST DEVELOPMENTS OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST IN THE WORLD.

In the days of Columbus civil liberty was a thing unknown. Kings were supposed to reign by divine right, and feudalism had chained the people to the soil. No Philosopher had imagined that a frame of government would ever be devised whose chief purpose it would be to "establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to its people and their posterity." Old Europe had no room for such a man as Washington. A new world was needed, and it came.

Religious liberty, if such a thing had been suggested, would in those days have been regarded as a vain chimera, a dream of insanity which even the persecuted heretic could hardly have ventured to entertain. Yet what is civil oppression compared with the crucifixion of the soul that is involved in religious tyranny? Strong men had already striven with their chains, but they had been more firmly riveted. Wickliffe's dust had been scattered on the

waters ; John Huss had perished at the stake. But the day of emancipation was at hand. On the day when Columbus sailed across the ocean two little boys were playing at their mother's knee in humble homes in Germany and Switzerland, to whom it was to be given to lead the vanguard in the coming contest for the deliverance of man. Their names were Martin Luther and Ulric Zwingli. Just twenty-five years after the discovery of America the Reformation began. Was this a mere coincidence ? Or were not the two events connected in true historic sequence ? Were they not both of them included in the same grand historic movement—the same revelation of the divine life—that was to bear humanity forward and upward, so that both revealed their highest significance in distant ages ?

Spain, beautiful Spain—the land of poetry and song—failed to know the time of her visitation. In her love of gold she found no room for higher aspirations ; in her pride she refused to learn, least of all, from nations which she despised Ere long the empire in which she rejoiced slipped from her grasp, and the sceptre was given to the nations of the north. Looking back to the period of the discovery, and remembering the subsequent history of Spain, we may rejoice that Columbus—grand and glorious pioneer as he undoubtedly was—did not turn his prow northward and discover the North American continent. In the development of civil liberty ; in the achievement of religious freedom ; in the innumerable discoveries and advances which have lessened the woes of humanity and brought it nearer to the realization of its grand ideal, there is nothing that more clearly reveals the way of the Lord than the fact that the portion of the continent which is broadest and best was reserved for the development of a free Germanic people.

From the discovery of America, through the Reformation, to modern culture and freedom, we trace the central stream of history. Without Columbus and the Reformation we should hardly have had a Newton or a Leibnitz, a Franklin or a Fulton, a Darwin or an Edison.

The century now drawing to a close has in some respects been not unlike the age in which Columbus lived. It has been a period of great discoveries—not geographical, indeed, but scientific and practical. In no period in the world's history have there been so many wonderful changes—so many triumphs of man over nature—and yet we are assured that the revelation has hardly begun. We

have but discovered a few outlying islands that indicate the continent which lies beyond. May we venture to add that many of our captains appear to be still in the dark with regard to the course in which they are sailing? That in matters of supreme importance they may be as far out of the way as was Columbus when he believed that he had reached the coast of India? O, that they had the faith of that great man, purified and exalted, that they might feel the hand that guides them and behold the lands that lie beyond. For of one thing we may be certain, whatever else may fail, that the ship which bears humanity will never drift beyond God's love and protection, and He will guide it safely to its destined haven.

On this great international festival—an occasion which for comprehensive meaning is hardly equalled in modern history—we have sought to behold the way of the Lord rather than the ways of men. "It is better" says the Psalmist, "to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes." It is well to remember the heroes of the past; and among them all, for commanding intellect, unwavering faith, and self-sacrificing devotion, there was none greater than Christopher Columbus. But all that is human is weak and all that is historical is transitory. To God alone belongs the Glory.

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